

Robert Nighthawk, whose real name was Robert Lee McCullum (or McCollum), was born Nov. 30, 1909, in Helena, Ark., and played harmonica for several years before he learned guitar from cousin, Houston Stackhouse, around 1930. They worked on a farm at Murphy Bayou, Miss., during the day, and at night Stackhouse would show Robert how to play blues.

They would team up with other bluesmen like Eugene Powell and a harmonica player named Percy who was said to be Nighthawk's brother, playing for black and white parties and dances in Mississippi. The two played briefly on a Jackson radio program and once accompanied country yodeller Jimmie Rodgers at a Jackson hotel. Nighthawk traveled further north through Mississippi into Tennessee, Arkansas and Missouri, meeting Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Sleepy John Estes and Will Shade, and even performing at Muddy Waters' first wedding reception.

Big Joe Williams remembers Nighthawk as Robert Lee McCoy, the name taken upon leaving the South for St. Louis in the mid-'30s when he was reportedly being sought for shooting a man. Nighthawk fell in with the local blues circle which included Big Joe, Charley Jordan, Walter Davis, Henry Townsend, Speckled Red, Peetie Wheatstraw, John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson and others. In May 1937 he made his recording debut for Bluebird in Aurora, Ill., with Sonny Boy and Big Joe. For the next few years he continued to come and recorded as Robert Lee McCoy, Rambling Bob and Peetie's Boy. He also played

either harmonica or guitar behind other Bluebird and Decca singers.

Nighthawk spent time in Chicago in the early '40s playing with Ann Sortier, one of a series of wives or girl friends. But he soon moved on, to other towns and other women. Big Joe said, "He didn't stay in no one place too long. He'd come here and leave—he played lots of clubs in Chicago, and the next thing, he done put up and gone... he'd go back to Big Foot Country. Played the roadhouses and things like that, all down in Blytheville, Steele, Mo., and on to West Memphis and on down to Friars Point, Clarksdale, Vicksburg, Louisiana..."

In 1942, back in Helena, Robert was becoming a Delta blues legend. Taking the sobriquet Robert Nighthawk (from his first record, "Prowling Nighthawk") and amplifying his guitar, he got himself a spot on KFFA. The broadcasts, usually sponsored by Bright Star or Mother's Best flour, gave Nighthawk a chance to advertise his nightly engagements at cafes, clubs, or dances. He employed Stackhouse, Ike Turner, Earl Hooker, Pinetop Perkins, Ernest Lane and Red Stevenson (a drummer Nighthawk nicknamed Kansas City Red). Nighthawk was a competitor of Sonny Boy Williamson, broadcast on KFFA for King Biscuit Flour. In the late '40s Nighthawk was based in other towns and radio stations in Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee, also heading through Missouri, Kentucky and southern Illinois with various band members. Personnel changed due to the leader's rambling ways and

his habit of shortchanging or stranding his sidemen. His only steady accompanist was a dancer-turned-drummer from Helena named Edward Lee Irvin, better known as Shorty or Little Nighthawk. Robert didn't record again until Muddy set him up with Chess in 1948.

In his Chess days (1948-50), Nighthawk and his new girl friend, Ethel Mae, worked mainly out of Cairo, Ill. or Chicago's 708 Club. He first recorded for United two years after the Aristocrat "Black Angel" session. In June 1953, he and Shorty were at the Polka Dot Inn in East St. Louis, according to an item in "Jazz Report" from a young St. Louis jazz and blues enthusiast named Bob Koester. Harmonica player Malcolm "Little Mack" Simmons sat in at the club for a couple of weeks and had the group lined up to do a concert for the St. Louis Jazz Club but it fell through when Mack suddenly left town.

He resumed his rambles through the southern states, but stayed mainly in the Helena/Friars Point area for most of the '50s and '60s, usually working with his son, drummer Sam Carr. He did return to Chicago at least twice, around 1960 when he rejoined Kansas City Red and in 1964 when Pete Welding and Norman Dayron recorded some excellent material by him while Don Kent and others wrote about him in "Blues Unlimited." Nighthawk played at the University of Chicago, and went to Canada for some personal appearances and recording. Willie Dixon produced two Nighthawk tracks for an English LP and used him as a sideman on a Koko Taylor session. Nighthawk fronted

Muddy's band at Pepper's Lounge when Muddy was prevented from singing due to a Regal Theater contract. Most of Nighthawk's work was in lesser South and West Side taverns or on Maxwell Street, and soon he headed back to Helena, his health failing.

Nearly every bluesman to come out of the Delta can recall seeing Nighthawk in some juke joint. He took over the King Biscuit Show after Sonny Boy died in 1965, but that didn't last long. George Mitchell recorded Stackhouse in Dundee, Miss., in August 1967, but Nighthawk had been in the hospital and could only back his cousin up on second guitar. Stackhouse took him to a "preacher woman" in Arkansas who read fortunes with a deck of cards. Her diagnosis: "that old-time dropsy". Stackhouse says "She said she coulda cured him but it done run too long then". On Nov. 5, 1967, Robert McCullum, suffering from congestive heart failure, died of a myocardial infarction at the Helena Hospital.

"Everybody liked him—he was a popular person," Kansas City Red reminisces. He coulda stayed up here in Chicago and played around as long as he wanted. But he just couldn't get his mind off of Helena, Ark."

—JIM O'NEAL (1977)

ALBUM PRODUCTION: Robert G. Koester
COMPILATION: Jim O'Neal • CD PRODUCTION: Steve Wagner
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and Leonard Allen
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